

Conflict Update # 37

April 22nd, 2022

Conflict Assessment

Russian troops are being 'ritually humiliated' in Ukraine but they are still in a position to win the war, Western officials cautioned last night. In their bleakest assessment of the campaign since the very first days, they admitted that Vladimir Putin's forces were gaining territory and presently outnumber the defenders by three soldiers to one.

Moscow's troops failed in their initial invasion objectives, with Ukraine inflicting a series of humiliating defeats on them. Officials now believe that with such a numerical advantage, and more effective leadership, the Russians will be difficult to dislodge from the territory they have won.

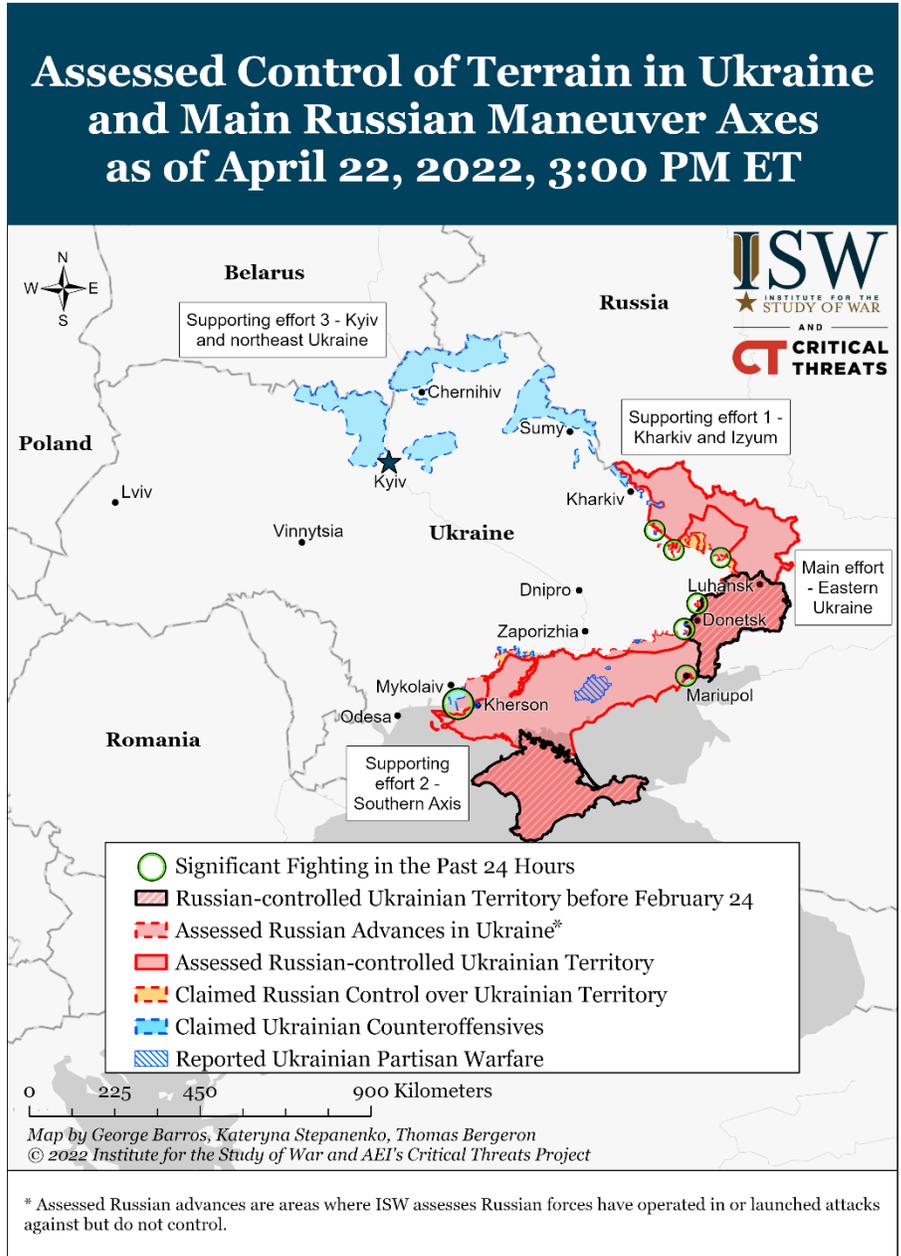
But they said that many of the Russian units now targeting the east of Ukraine and the Donbas region had not had time to properly reconstitute after receiving a mauling in the failed advance on Kyiv.

As a result, they were being fed into the new phase of the war in a 'piecemeal' fashion with limited impact, taking 'relatively small amounts of terrain'.

This is similar to how events unfolded north of Kyiv in February this year. Russian advances progressed until Ukrainian forces centered their defenses to halt them.

It also speaks of the reversal of US arms provisions where previously only "defensive" arms were delivered. Offensive arms, such as the 155mm howitzers are now being airlifted into battle zones (see following article). Once in place, Ukrainian forces will be able to outrange Russian artillery and force them to either halt or disperse.

The US is sending 90 of these pieces to Ukraine, with further pieces en route from UK, Canada, Holland, France and Slovakia.



Russian General slips regarding real Russian mission – General Minnekaev stated that Russian control of southern Ukraine provides Russia a future capability to conduct an offensive toward Transnistria, rather than announcing an imminent Russian offensive toward Moldova. Minnekaev said Russian control of southern Ukraine will provide “another way out to Transnistria,” the illegally Russian-occupied strip of territory in Moldova, where he falsely claimed “there are also facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population.”

Subordinate Main Effort—Mariupol - Russian forces continued to bombard the Azovstal Steel Plant and besiege the remaining Ukrainian defenders. Several Ukrainian government sources reported on April 22 that Russian forces have abandoned direct attacks on Azovstal but continue to shell the facility and have repeatedly refused Ukrainian requests to open humanitarian corridors to evacuate civilians. Russian and DNR forces continued to consolidate their control of key buildings in Mariupol and are likely setting conditions to set up an occupation government.

Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts - Russian forces continued local attacks along the line of contact in eastern Ukraine (continuing to focus on Rubizhne, Popasna, and Marinka) on April 22 and made minor gains around Slovyansk, capturing the town of Lozova. Their forces additionally consolidated their recently captured positions to prepare for further assaults. The military situation did not substantially change in the last 24 hours, and Russian forces are continuing to conduct localized attacks while feeding in additional reinforcements instead of pausing to prepare for a wider offensive.

Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv and Izyum - Russian units from the 6th CAA and Baltic and Northern Fleets (the Ukrainian General Staff reported up to seven battalion tactical groups (BTGs), though we cannot independently confirm this number, and these units are likely heavily degraded) continued to partially block Kharkiv and shell the city. A pro-Russian telegram channel reported that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian counterattack on Kozacha Lopan, north of Kharkiv and just 5km from the Russian border.

Supporting Effort #2—Southern Axis - Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks on Ukrainian positions west of Kherson and towards Zaporizhia in the last 24 hours. The Ukrainian General Staff reported elements of Russia’s 19th Motor Rifle Division (of the 58th CAA) deployed to the Zaporizhia front, likely to support offensive operations to the north intended to encircle Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine, though Russian forces remain highly unlikely to make significant headway in these offensive operations.

Supporting Effort #3—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine - There was no significant change in this area in the past 24 hours.

Ukrainian Military Intelligence reported on April 22 that several Russian officers have been fired or imprisoned for failures in Ukraine. The Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russian authorities arrested the Commander of the Black Sea Fleet Admiral Osipov and are investigating Black Sea Fleet Chief of Staff Vice Admiral S. Pinchuk, likely for the loss of the Moskva. The GUR additionally reported the commander of the 6th CAA, the commander and deputy commander of the 1st Guards Tank Army, and the commander of the 22nd Army Corps have all been removed from their posts for unsatisfactory performance. Purges of Russian officers are unlikely to improve Russian capabilities, as replacement commanders will likely be less experienced and under intense pressure to achieve likely unreasonable objectives set by the Kremlin.

Putin’s Ukraine Nightmare Is Getting Worse: America Is Sending More Arms - In response to continued Russian aggression in Ukraine, the U.S. is sending an additional package of security aid to Ukraine. The latest package includes heavy weapon systems that are intended to help the Ukrainian military fend off the renewed Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine.

With the latest package of military aid, the U.S. has sent Ukraine 90 155mm howitzers. In only two weeks, the Pentagon has provided 18 howitzers in the first package and 72 howitzers in the second.

Despite Putin's 'big show' over Mariupol victory, it's still 'contested': Pentagon - Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Friday that the U.S. believes Mariupol is "contested" despite Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday declaring a victory there and making a "big show" out of telling his troops not to invade a steel factory where Ukrainian soldiers and civilians are believed to be taking cover.

Nuclear Tactic

The Kremlin remains unlikely to use a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine during this phase of the war - The Kremlin likely assesses that the use of a nuclear weapon would trigger greater NATO involvement in the war, making the Russian use of a nuclear weapon a net loss for Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denied that Russia would use nuclear weapons in Ukraine and claimed that Russia is only considering using conventional weapons in statements on April 19 that Kremlin-run media outlets subsequently heavily promoted.

Peace Talks

Lavrov claims Russia-Ukraine talks have stalled - Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said talks between Moscow and Kyiv have stalled, appearing to contradict his own negotiator.

"They (negotiations) have stalled now," he said after talks with his Kazakh counterpart in Moscow. Vladimir Medinsky, who is Russia's chief negotiator with Ukraine, however, said he had spoken to his Ukrainian counterpart on Friday.

He said "several long conversations" took place without giving more details. Earlier this week, the Kremlin said Russia had submitted a new written proposal, but Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he had neither seen nor heard about it.

Russia and Ukraine are unlikely to resume negotiations in the coming weeks. Both sides await the outcome of Russia's ongoing offensive in eastern Ukraine. Kyiv likely assesses that its military has the potential to push Russian forces back to their pre-February 24 positions and is unlikely to engage in negotiations until that outcome occurs or becomes significantly less likely. (ISW).

Ukrainian Red line - Growing reports of Russian atrocities are bolstering Ukraine's political will to fight and make the resumption of higher-level negotiations increasingly unlikely. Zelensky told CNN that "there comes a time when no one wants to talk. Our society does not want us to continue negotiations."

Zelensky emphasized the link between Russian atrocities in Bucha, Volnovakha, Borodyanka, and Mariupol and Ukraine's unwillingness to negotiate. Ukrainian negotiator Mykhailo Podolyak said that Russian atrocities against Ukrainian civilians make it difficult for Ukraine to approach negotiations "unemotionally." Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba emphasized that the "only level of contact" between Russia and Ukraine is the negotiating team made up of parliamentarians and "representatives of various institutions."

Kuleba warned that Mariupol may become a "red line" for Ukraine if Russian forces kill the remaining Ukrainian defenders in the city. Zelensky said the Kremlin rejected a Ukrainian proposal to hold a "special round of negotiations" with Russia to arrange the evacuation of remaining civilians and defenders from Mariupol on April 20.

Post-Conflict

The Kremlin likely intends to create one or more proxy states in occupied southern Ukraine to cement its military occupation and set conditions to demand permanent control over these regions. (ISW).

Pariah State - Russia will be a 'pariah state in the eyes of many people forever' and there'll be no 'starting over' while Putin is still in charge, expert says.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is facing increasing animosity both abroad and at home as his war in Ukraine approaches two full months. Experts cite strategy failures, mounting military losses, and the dire economic consequences of Western sanctions — all blamed almost entirely on Putin — as evidence painting a bleak picture of Russia's future.

"It's suicidally bad what he's doing to his country, its economy, and its standing in the world," said Robert English, a professor at the University of Southern California who studies Russia, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe.

The longtime Russian leader's decisions on the Ukraine invasion face rising scrutiny as a small but growing number of Kremlin insiders have started to express doubts about the war.

While Putin continues to present a confident front — hand-waving the true cost of Western sanctions and dismissing the political consequences of war — some Russia insiders are said to be losing faith.

English says they have good reason to do so. He said Putin's foray into Ukraine had already proved more costly for Russia than the Soviet Union's nearly 10-year war in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

"The USSR lost around 15,000-plus soldiers in Afghanistan in a decade of fighting," English said. "And that was enough to be considered a 'bleeding wound,'" he added. "Putin has lost close to that amount in one month — not one year, much less 10 years — but in one month."

Putin's Health Questioned

Russian President Vladimir Putin's appearance during a Thursday meeting with his defense minister has left people questioning the leader's health status. Video clips and still images of Putin's conference with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu have been making the rounds on social media. While the Kremlin indicated that the two met to discuss Russia's military strategy in Mariupol, a strategic port city in Ukraine where Putin has declared "success," onlookers from afar have focused on how the president looked.

In the images, Putin can be seen gripping the table between him and Shoigu, as well as slouching down in his chair. Speculation soon spread that he could be in bad health, though rumors have previously surfaced in recent months that the leader could be suffering from an illness. The Kremlin earlier this month denied that Putin had undergone surgery related to thyroid cancer, online outlet The Moscow Times reported on April 1.

Poisoning? Has happened in Russia before.

NATO

The Kremlin is increasingly describing the war in Ukraine as a war with NATO to the domestic Russian audience to explain slower-than-intended operations and mounting casualties. (ISW).

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on April 20 that the United States and NATO are “handling processes” in Ukraine and that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky “cannot be viewed as an independent politician.” Zakharova claimed on April 19 that the United States has been preparing to “incite” aggression in eastern Ukraine for eight years. Russian State Duma Committee on International Affairs Chairman Leonid Slutsky accused the United States and the United Kingdom of using Ukraine as a “springboard” to justify further confrontation with Russia on April 17. Russian Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin falsely claimed on April 15 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky confessed to intentionally setting conditions to start a war with Russia by purchasing arms and

attempting to join NATO prior to Russia's invasion, reiterating the longstanding Kremlin claim that all Ukrainian arms purchases are inherently offensive toward Russia.

The Kremlin is failing to deter NATO expansion and failing to disrupt Ukraine's military alignment with the West. Russian Ambassador-at-Large and Chairman of the Committee of Senior Officials of the Arctic Council Nikolai Korchunov warned Sweden and Finland against joining NATO on April 17 and claimed that the expansion of NATO would be to the detriment of "traditionally non-aligned blocs" by leading to mutual distrust. Finland's parliament debated its accession to NATO on April 20 and will likely ask to join the alliance in the coming weeks.

Humanitarian

UK hands 72,000 visas to refugees - Almost 72,000 UK visas have now been issued to Ukrainian refugees, figures showed yesterday, but fewer than a third have arrived so far.

Official data showed more than 107,000 people applied for visas under two schemes, including 66,000 through the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship programme. It means there is still a backlog of more than 35,000 applications to process.

Mariupol - All that remains of Ukraine's resistance there is a small contingent of fighters and civilians sheltering in the Azovstal steel plant, which remains surrounded by invading soldiers.

'Hundreds of civilians, children, injured Ukrainian defenders are trapped in plant's shelters. They have almost no food, water, essential medicine,' a Ukrainian foreign ministry statement said this morning. 'An urgent humanitarian corridor is needed from the Azovstal plant with guarantees people will be safe.'

But Putin today cruelly instructed his defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, to command troops to seal off all routes out of the plant - effectively condemning those trapped within to a slow and painful death from thirst, hunger and exhaustion.

'Block off this industrial area so that a fly cannot not pass through,' the Russian President told Shoigu, before declaring the city 'successfully liberated'.

The Kremlin continues to falsely blame Ukrainian forces for planning or conducting "provocations" in areas where Russian forces intend to commit or have already committed atrocities. The Kremlin likely seeks to introduce doubt into future attributions of war crimes and to diminish global support for Ukraine by blaming Ukrainian forces for crimes already committed by Russian forces. The Kremlin likely also intends to negatively portray Ukrainian forces to the Russian population to maintain domestic support for the invasion. (ISW).

Russia's Ministry of Defense claimed on April 19 that Ukrainian forces were planning several independent attacks on civilians across Ukraine including shooting civilians that surrender in Mariupol; shelling civilians in Zaporizhia, Odesa, Sumy, and Kharkiv Oblasts; and executing Russian civilians in Odesa. Such false claims indicate that Russian forces may have killed civilians in some named areas and intend to blame Ukraine for their deaths. No fighting has taken place in Odesa since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24; the Kremlin likely intends claims regarding Odesa to further Kremlin claims of a Ukrainian genocide against Russians.

Country's top prosecutor accuses Russia of pre-planning mass murder, torture and rape - Russia had a pre-hatched plan for its troops to torture, rape and execute civilians in Ukraine who refuse to capitulate, Ukraine's top prosecutor has said.

Iryna Venediktova said, as a Ukrainian citizen, she understood why political leaders like US President Joe Biden have accused Vladimir Putin's forces of committing genocide in her country, but as a prosecutor she said she must gather the evidence in areas like the besieged city of Mariupol.

The prosecutor general revealed there are a "huge number of cases" of Russian troops killing Ukrainians simply because they did not like them.

Her team is working on almost 8,000 war crimes cases from around Ukraine, including summary executions, sexual violence and the forced deportation of children to Russia.

The number of cases grows daily as does the volume of evidence.

In the Kyiv region alone, where Russian forces occupied a number of towns and villages before withdrawing, the prosecutor general said her team had information on more than 1,000 civilians who were killed, though the total number could well be higher.

Many of the victims had been shot dead. Asked whether she thought the shooting of civilians, execution-style, had been pre-planned by Russia before the invasion, Ms Venediktova said: "it is a strategy of their chief of commander, because we see the same strategy in other countries.

"They have Plan A: cities should capitulate, if a city does not capitulate it means Plan B: to scare this population to the maximum. Kill, rape, torture, and other brutal things. "It is a strategy of war." She said there was also evidence of malice leading to murder.

Human Rights Activists Call For Indictment of Russian Patriarch Kirill - Willy Fautré and Patricia Duval are European human rights advocates known for defending religious communities from persecution and interference by state authorities, often defending traditional believers from rigidly secular government policies.

But now they are accusing Patriarch Kirill, the spiritual leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, of inciting aggression and crimes against humanity by his outspoken support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and urging his indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In support of their charges, Fautré and Duval cite a sermon Kirill delivered at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior on Feb. 27, three days after the invasion began. As documented by the Russian state Interfax service, Kirill prayed for the Lord to preserve the Russian land... "a land which now includes Russia and Ukraine and Belarus and other tribes and peoples." As noted in a European Parliament Resolution, Kirill provided "theological cover" for Russia's war aimed at absorbing the country within a greater Russia or neutralizing it as an independent democratic state.

Impacts

Russian censorship - Russian state censorship body Roskomnadzor further restricted access to independent publications and international coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the past week. Russia is particularly targeting international reports of Russian war crimes, which reporting can undermine the Kremlin's false framing that Ukraine is responsible for all civilian deaths in Ukraine. The Kremlin has ordered intimidation tactics to be used against opposition journalists, activists, and concerned citizens within Russia to deter any realistic coverage of the Russian invasion. The Russian Ministry of Defense classified information on the relatives of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine on April 20 (which was previously available through civilian institutions due to the families of deceased personnel receiving state benefits), citing security risks. Limiting the publication of such data will enable the Kremlin to disguise the full scope of Russian losses from the Russian public.

A Move to Undermine the Anachronistic Veto Powers in the Security Council Gains Traction - The five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) – UK, US, France, China and Russia – have exercised their veto powers primarily to protect their own national interests or the interests of their close political and military allies.

But a proposed new resolution before the General Assembly (GA)—entitled “Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council”—is an attempt to undermine the veto in a move likely to be supported by a majority of the 193 member states. As of last week, the resolution had 57 co-sponsors—and counting.

US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield told reporters the United States was one of the co-sponsors of the resolution, spearheaded by a core group of Member States led by Liechtenstein.

“This innovative measure would automatically convene a meeting of the General Assembly after a veto has been cast in the Security Council,” she said.

How China's Ukraine stance may be final straw for eastern EU countries - Criticized by Western leaders for its neutral stance over Russia’s aggression on Ukraine, China sought to limit the damage with central and eastern European nations this week, but it might already be too late, experts have told Euronews.

Huo Yuzhen, Beijing’s special representative for the China-Central and Eastern Europe Investment Cooperation Fund (CEEC), toured eight countries in the region -- the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Poland — this week. Ostensibly, the trip was to promote further co-operation, but it also came as Beijing continues to claim neutrality over the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

An EU-China summit earlier this month, where Beijing had hoped to stick to the planned pre-war agenda focusing on bilateral relations and efforts to tackle climate change, was overshadowed by Ukraine with Brussels chief Ursula von der Leyen stressing the events in Ukraine “is not only a defining moment for our continent, but it is also a defining moment for our relationship with the rest of the world”.

She added that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China “has a very special responsibility” and that any support to Russia’s ability to wage war “would lead to a major reputational damage for China here in Europe.”

The reputational damage appears to have started. “China’s siding with Russia and blaming NATO is absolutely unacceptable for most of Central and Eastern Europe,” Mareike Ohlberg, a senior fellow in the Asia programme at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, told Euronews.

“The Chinese government doesn’t seem to understand, or doesn’t want to understand, that Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine is seen as an existential issue for most countries in the region,” she added.

For the analyst, “there’s a small chance that China can limit the damage at least superficially by promising investment or access to China, but I think most of the relationships with countries in the region will continue to deteriorate.”

China has increased its economic and political footprint in the central and eastern European region over the past decade through its Belt and Road Initiative with investments to boost bilateral trade and local infrastructure.

Containment

France sending heavy weapons to Ukraine - French President Emmanuel Macron says his country is sending heavy weapons to Ukraine, including a self-propelled howitzer and an anti-tank guided missile weapon system.

"After all, we are supplying considerable equipment, from the Milan to the Caesar to various types of weapons," Macron said, referring to the Milan anti-tank system and the Caesar howitzer. Macron told a regional newspaper 40 Ukrainian



soldiers would be trained in France to operate the howitzers.

Ukrainian officials including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy have repeatedly asked European and NATO powers to provide heavier weapons, especially artillery.

Britain will give Poland tanks so they can arm Ukraine with theirs - Britain will hand Poland tanks so they can gift their Soviet-era ones to Ukraine, Boris Johnson confirmed last night in a dramatic hike in support for fighting Putin.

Britain and America are also working intensely on a new "security guarantee" for President Zelenskyy which will mean that while Ukraine does not join NATO - to Putin's fury - their safety will be underwritten by global allies.

The PM said it will "back them up" with military training, intelligence sharing and more weapons, in a bid to make Kyiv "impregnable" to another Russian invasion.

As it is understood Poland are negotiating a transfer of Challenger 2 tanks from the Ministry of Defense, so they can hand soviet-era T72s to the Ukrainian army who already know how to operate them.



Sanctions

Dutch government plans to stop Russian energy imports by end 2022 - The Netherlands plans to stop importing natural gas and oil from Russia by the end of the year, Prime Minister Mark Rutte said.

"It really is a challenge. We are very dependent on Russian gas in Europe and there are not many alternatives to LNG," Rutte said. The government will subsidize energy companies to fill its Bergermeer gas storage facility to 70% capacity by the end of the year.

Italy's Russian gas boycott gathers pace thanks to new deals in Africa - Italy is now turning to Africa to help wean itself off Russian gas, ever since the invasion of Ukraine put crucial supplies at risk.

The European nation is striking deals with Angola, Algeria and the Republic of Congo with the aim of eliminating Russian gas imports in the next 18 months. Italy currently receives 38 per cent of its natural gas from Russia and is working on deals to replace about half.

Last week Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi secured a deal for more natural gas imports from Algeria, which provides some 21 billion cubic metres of gas to Italy via the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline.

Foreign Affairs Minister Luigi Di Maio has since announced that they will increase exports of Angolan gas to Italy. On Thursday, the country's leading energy company ENI signed a similar deal with the Republic of Congo.

Widening of War

Russia says it seeks 'full control' of southern Ukraine, access to Moldova's Trans-Dniester region - The Russian military has said it wants "another way" to access Moldova's breakaway Trans-Dniester region. Ukraine has warned Russia seeks to establish new "republics" in occupied areas.